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ABSTRACT

Asserting that escalating violence against and by children and adolescents is the manifestation of a range of serious and long neglected problems, this report examines the contribution of deadly firearms to the prevalence of violence in American communities, presents statistics on national trends, and describes state actions. Following an executive summary, the report presents trends in child and teen firearm deaths from 1979 to 1997 due to homicide, suicide, accident, and unknown intent. Age and racial differences in deaths due to firearms are also presented. In addition, state statistics for firearm deaths from 1995 to 1997 are presented in a tabular format. The report continues with an examination of actions taken by various states and communities to protect children from guns. Gun safety laws are described, including laws related to trigger locks, child firearm access prevention laws, and transfer/sale/possession restrictions. The type of gun control laws is delineated by state. The report concludes with recommendations for actions to be taken by parents and grandparents, educators, religious leaders, and community leaders. (Contains 26 references.) (KB)

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# CHILDREN AND GUNS

## A Children's Defense Fund Report on Children Dying from Gunfire in America

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# CHILDREN AND GUNS

A CHILDREN'S DEFENSE FUND REPORT ON CHILDREN
DYING FROM GUNFIRE IN AMERICA

## Summary

Gun violence is all too routine in the lives of our nation's children. Between 1979 and 1997, gunfire killed nearly 80,000 children and teens in America – 25,000 more than the total number of American soldiers killed in battle in Vietnam. Firearms wounded an additional 320,000 children during this same period.[1]

The latest data released in 1999[2] shows that in a single year:

- 4,205 children and teens were killed by gunfire — one every two hours, nearly 12 every day
- 2,562 were murdered by gunfire
- 1,262 committed suicide using a firearm — more than three every day
- 306 died from an accidental shooting
- 2,357 were White
- 1,687 were Black
- 629 were under 15 years
- 191 were under 10 years
- 84 were under five years
- Nearly three times as many children under 10 died from gunfire as the number of law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty

We aiso know that:

- American children under 15 are 12 times more likely to die from gunfire than children in 25 other industrialized countries combined
- Homicide is the third leading cause of death among children five to 14
- 61 percent of the 80,000 children killed by gunfire since 1979 were White; 36 percent were Black
- Children are twice as likely as adults to be victims of violent crime, and more likely to be killed by adults than by other children
- White youths are six times more likely to commit suicide than Black youths although the suicide rate for Black youths is up more than 100 percent since 1980

The good news is that the number of children dying from gunfire has declined. The bad news is that 4,205 children lost their lives — a shameful statistic. The 4,205 deaths are equal to:

- The number of passengers on eight jumbo jets
- 90 school buses full of children
- More than an entire high school graduating class of a school the size of Columbine every school month

The price that children pay for gun violence goes beyond the numbers who die. Many more children suffer as they lose a family member or a friend to gun violence; sleep in the bathtub for cover; are scared walking to and from school; or cannot play outside for fear of being hit by a random bullet. Gun violence is senseless. And it is preventable.

Every parent, grandparent, public official, and citizen must act now to stop this undeclared war in America's neighborhoods that endangers our children and all of us. It is time to stand up and protect children instead of guns.

## Latest Statistics and National Trends: Gunfire Kills a Classroom Full of Children Every Two Days

Gunfire killed 4,205 children and teens in the United States in 1997.[3] That is one child every two hours, nearly 12 children every day, a classroom full every two days. According to the Centers for Disease Control, the rate of firearm deaths among children under 15 is almost 12 times higher in the United States than in 25 other industrialized countries combined.[4]

The tragic school shootings in Littleton, Colorado; Conyers, Georgia; West Paducah, Kentucky; Springfield, Oregon; Jonesboro, Arkansas; and elsewhere are simply the latest wake-up calls for what has been happening every day in America for a very long time. The numbers are shameful.

The loss of children's lives because of gun violence means:

- 629 children did not reach the average high school age
- 191 children did not live to their tenth birthday
- 84 children did not live long enough to start school

The good news is that the number of child gun deaths dropped below 4,500 for the first time this decade; the bad news is the death toll remains astonishingly high.

There is an undeclared civil war in America's neighborhoods and children are its casualties. It is time to stop the war.

## CHILD AND TEEN FIREARM DEATHS OVER TIME

### Firearm deaths, 1979-1997*

| | Total | Homicide | Suicide | Accident | Unknown Intent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1979 | 3,710 | 1,651 | 1,220 | 726 | 113 |
| 1980 | 3,749 | 1,743 | 1,214 | 689 | 103 |
| 1981 | 3,589 | 1,660 | 1,213 | 604 | 112 |
| 1982 | 3,332 | 1,498 | 1,207 | 550 | 77 |
| 1983 | 2,962 | 1,238 | 1,150 | 504 | 70 |
| 1984 | 3,030 | 1,289 | 1,114 | 552 | 75 |
| 1985 | 3,169 | 1,322 | 1,256 | 519 | 72 |
| 1986 | 3,349 | 1,513 | 1,293 | 472 | 71 |
| 1987 | 3,400 | 1,573 | 1,281 | 467 | 79 |
| 1988 | 3,974 | 1,953 | 1,387 | 543 | 91 |
| 1989 | 4,384 | 2,367 | 1,380 | 567 | 70 |
| 1990 | 4,935 | 2,852 | 1,476 | 541 | 66 |
| 1991 | 5,329 | 3,247 | 1,436 | 551 | 95 |
| 1992 | 5,353 | 3,336 | 1,426 | 501 | 90 |
| 1993 | 5,715 | 3,625 | 1,460 | 526 | 104 |
| 1994 | 5,793 | 3,579 | 1,565 | 512 | 137 |
| 1995 | 5,254 | 3,249 | 1,450 | 440 | 115 |
| 1996 | 4,613 | 2,836 | 1,309 | 376 | 92 |
| 1997 | 4,205 | 2,562 | 1,262 | 306 | 75 |
| **Total** | **79,845** | **43,093** | **25,099** | **9,946** | **1,707** |

*Data are for persons under age 20; excludes legal intervention.
Source: National Center for Health Statistics, Division of Vital Statistics, Table 292 (unpublished, 1999). Calculations by Children's Defense Fund.

## HOMICIDE

More than 60 percent of children killed by gunfire are murdered. Homicide accounted for over 2,500 deaths among children and teens.[5] Homicide is now the third leading cause of death among children five to 14 years old and the second leading cause of death among 15 to 24 year-olds.[6] The Department of Justice reports that the 65 percent jump in juvenile homicides between 1987 and 1993 can be attributed almost entirely to the use of firearms. Although overall juvenile homicide rates have steadily declined since then, firearm homicide remains the most common type.[7]

**May 12, 1999.** In Prince George's County, Maryland, a 17-year-old youth faces murder charges after shooting his 14-year-old friend in the head. The two friends were "horsing around" after school with a handgun the older teen had pulled from a closet when the weapon unintentionally discharged, killing the younger teen. According to the police, the gun belonged to the 17-year-old's mother who had kept guns in the house for several years to ward off intruders. (*The Washington Post*, May 14, 1999)



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Gun violence is an equal opportunity disaster that knows no boundaries. Nearly 80,000 children have been killed by gunfire since 1979—61 percent were White, and 36 percent were Black.[8] Between 1980 and 1997, where the race of the murderers is known, 92 percent of juveniles were murdered by persons of their own race.[9]

Children are twice as likely as adults to be victims of violent crime and three times as likely to be victims of assault.[10] Children are more likely to be killed by adults than other children and most murders are not committed by strangers, but by family members, neighbors, or acquaintances.[11] Female victims are nearly twice as likely as male victims to have been killed by a family member.[12]

## Suicide

Thirty percent of young people killed by guns take their own lives. Suicide accounted for 1,262 of the 4,205 child and teen gun deaths – more than three deaths every day. Guns are used in two out of three youth suicides and are the most likely to be fatal.[13] According to the latest statistics:

- Males were almost 12 times more likely to commit suicide with a firearm than females.
- White youths were six times more likely to take their own lives than Black youths.

Seventy-five percent of guns involved in self-inflicted and unintentional firearm injuries among children come from the victim's home or the home of a friend or relative.[14] Whether children obtain a gun illegally in their neighborhoods or gain access to a family member's gun at home, the results are the same: tragic injury, death, and grieving family and friends.

**September 7, 1999.** In Plano, Texas, a 16-year-old boy was found dead in a bathroom stall at his high school. According to police, the teenager took his father's .22 caliber pistol from the attic in the family home and used it to kill himself at school later that day. The boy's father had originally purchased the gun to go sport shooting with his son, stored it in the attic and had simply forgotten that the gun was there. (*The Dallas Morning News*, September 24, 1999)

## Accidental

Accidental shootings accounted for 7 percent of child deaths. More than 300 children died in gun accidents, almost one child every day.[15] Accidental shootings can be prevented by simple safety measures. Studies repeatedly show that removing guns from the home increases family members' safety. Family members are at a greater risk of injury or death from having a gun in the home than from an intruder.[16]

**September 25, 1999.** In New Orleans, a 4-year-old boy accidentally shot and killed himself with a handgun he found in his grandmother's bedroom. Described as a "happy-go-lucky kid," with a fondness for toy dump trunks, the young boy was known and loved by everybody in the neighborhood. According to police, the .380 caliber pistol belonged to the grandmother's boyfriend and was kept loaded and unlocked in a drawer of their bedside table. (*The Advocate*, Metro Edition, September 27, 1999).

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## BLACK YOUTH

Although guns kill more White children than Black children, young Black males are particularly affected by gun violence. Homicide is the leading cause of death among Black males ages 15 to 24.[17] The firearm death rate for black males ages 15 to 24 is five times that of White males in that age bracket.[18] More young Black males under age 25 are killed by gun violence every year in America than died from all the lynchings throughout American history.[19] Suicide is another disturbing trend among Black youths, although six times as many White children commit suicide. The overall suicide rate for Black youths is up more than 100 percent since 1980, and firearm suicides accounted for 96 percent of this increase.[20]

**Firearm deaths of children and teens, by age and race,* 1997**

| | All firearm deaths | | | Homicide | | | Suicide | | | Accident | | | Intent Unknown | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age | All races | White | Black | All races | White | Black | All races | White | Black | All races | White | Black | All races | White | Black |
| Under 1 | 9 | 3 | 6 | 9 | 3 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1-4 | 75 | 49 | 24 | 53 | 36 | 15 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 20 | 13 | 7 | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| 5-9 | 107 | 66 | 35 | 77 | 49 | 25 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 28 | 16 | 9 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| 10-14 | 438 | 290 | 127 | 207 | 105 | 88 | 126 | 105 | 19 | 94 | 72 | 17 | 11 | 8 | 3 |
| 15-19 | 3,576 | 1,949 | 1,495 | 2,216 | 852 | 1,282 | 1,135 | 945 | 148 | 164 | 117 | 41 | 61 | 35 | 24 |
| **Total** | **4,205** | **2,357** | **1,687** | **2,562** | **1,045** | **1,416** | **1,262** | **1,051** | **167** | **306** | **218** | **74** | **75** | **43** | **30** |

*Data are for persons ages 0-19. The figures for All Races include races other than White and Black. Separate tabulations for these other races are not available from NCHS's unpublished tabulations.
Source: National Center for Health Statistics. Calculations by Children's Defense Fund.

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## Firearm deaths among children and teens, ages 0–19, 1995–1997

| | Total* | | | Homicide* | | | Suicide | | | Accident | | | Unknown intent | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 |
| Alabama | 119 | 104 | 93 | 61 | 59 | 57 | 38 | 25 | 23 | 15 | 14 | 10 | 5 | 6 | 3 |
| Alaska | 19 | 22 | 23 | 7 | 6 | 9 | 8 | 12 | 10 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Arizona | 140 | 120 | 117 | 92 | 64 | 53 | 36 | 47 | 52 | 10 | 4 | 5 | 2 | 5 | 7 |
| Arkansas | 85 | 63 | 55 | 48 | 27 | 28 | 28 | 26 | 18 | 3 | 9 | 7 | 6 | 1 | 2 |
| California | 843 | 672 | 594 | 650 | 508 | 457 | 129 | 108 | 106 | 53 | 52 | 26 | 11 | 4 | 5 |
| Colorado | 63 | 43 | 57 | 28 | 15 | 22 | 26 | 23 | 31 | 8 | 4 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Connecticut | 29 | 36 | 21 | 23 | 29 | 17 | 5 | 6 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Delaware | 10 | 5 | - | - | 4 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| District of Columbia | 75 | 62 | 65 | 73 | 59 | 59 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| Florida | 204 | 190 | 165 | 132 | 116 | 108 | 56 | 57 | 44 | 12 | 12 | 12 | 4 | 5 | 1 |
| Georgia | 154 | 160 | 129 | 94 | 79 | 70 | 46 | 51 | 35 | 14 | 24 | 20 | 0 | 6 | 4 |
| Hawaii | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Idaho | 29 | 27 | 26 | 7 | 11 | 2 | 14 | 11 | 21 | 7 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Illinois | 320 | 308 | 254 | 250 | 263 | 211 | 50 | 33 | 29 | 16 | 7 | 10 | 4 | 5 | 4 |
| Indiana | 117 | 98 | 79 | 59 | 55 | 47 | 40 | 30 | 21 | 15 | 8 | 8 | 3 | 5 | 3 |
| Iowa | 28 | 22 | 33 | 7 | 8 | 8 | 18 | 13 | 20 | 3 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Kansas | 49 | 53 | 53 | 28 | 24 | 28 | 16 | 22 | 17 | 5 | 7 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Kentucky | 59 | 52 | 57 | 20 | 23 | 34 | 27 | 20 | 16 | 12 | 9 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Louisiana | 174 | 192 | 154 | 115 | 133 | 98 | 37 | 43 | 39 | 19 | 15 | 15 | 3 | 1 | 2 |
| Maine | 6 | 5 | 13 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 4 | 10 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Maryland | 143 | 106 | 104 | 118 | 88 | 91 | 20 | 13 | 11 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 0 |
| Massachusetts | 40 | 32 | 24 | 32 | 26 | 17 | 8 | 5 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Michigan | 202 | 157 | 156 | 129 | 96 | 103 | 52 | 42 | 41 | 14 | 13 | 10 | 7 | 6 | 2 |
| Minnesota | 54 | 56 | 55 | 22 | 25 | 26 | 24 | 21 | 25 | 8 | 6 | 4 | 0 | 4 | 0 |
| Mississippi | 101 | 77 | 81 | 48 | 38 | 41 | 26 | 19 | 28 | 21 | 18 | 11 | 6 | 2 | 1 |
| Missouri | 139 | 101 | 97 | 84 | 63 | 48 | 40 | 33 | 34 | 11 | 5 | 13 | 4 | 0 | 2 |
| Montana | 20 | 20 | 16 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 13 | 12 | 8 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Nebraska | 24 | 28 | 26 | 14 | 8 | 12 | 7 | 17 | 13 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Nevada | 44 | 36 | 34 | 17 | 25 | 21 | 21 | 8 | 13 | 5 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| New Hampshire | 10 | 7 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 7 | 6 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| New Jersey | 55 | 66 | 53 | 43 | 55 | 43 | 11 | 6 | 7 | 0 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| New Mexico | 37 | 43 | 40 | 17 | 22 | 22 | 20 | 17 | 14 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| New York | 234 | 199 | 146 | 170 | 150 | 107 | 43 | 43 | 33 | 16 | 6 | 4 | 5 | 0 | 2 |
| North Carolina | 150 | 135 | 92 | 77 | 70 | 45 | 53 | 49 | 37 | 19 | 15 | 9 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| North Dakota | 12 | 9 | 8 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 9 | 8 | 8 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Ohio | 132 | 126 | 95 | 64 | 75 | 49 | 46 | 31 | 36 | 19 | 17 | 8 | 3 | 3 | 2 |
| Oklahoma | 74 | 61 | 82 | 30 | 30 | 48 | 34 | 25 | 29 | 8 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| Oregon | 57 | 39 | 38 | 18 | 9 | 13 | 28 | 24 | 19 | 10 | 6 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 3 |
| Pennsylvania | 159 | 181 | 167 | 100 | 113 | 108 | 50 | 59 | 49 | 7 | 4 | 9 | 2 | 5 | 1 |
| Rhode Island | 6 | 6 | 4 | 6 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| South Carolina | 66 | 78 | 54 | 26 | 39 | 32 | 24 | 27 | 16 | 14 | 9 | 5 | 2 | 3 | 1 |
| South Dakota | 13 | 10 | 12 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 7 | 9 | 7 | 4 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Tennessee | 137 | 123 | 117 | 75 | 66 | 64 | 40 | 32 | 37 | 16 | 23 | 12 | 6 | 2 | 4 |
| Texas | 462 | 359 | 377 | 289 | 202 | 194 | 126 | 121 | 139 | 32 | 27 | 39 | 15 | 9 | 5 |
| Utah | 54 | 37 | 35 | 14 | 11 | 10 | 37 | 24 | 24 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Vermont | 6 | 5 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Virginia | 106 | 109 | 114 | 65 | 54 | 68 | 29 | 43 | 39 | 10 | 12 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Washington | 75 | 67 | 83 | 37 | 31 | 35 | 29 | 31 | 36 | 7 | 4 | 8 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| West Virginia | 28 | 16 | 23 | 10 | 6 | 9 | 15 | 8 | 10 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Wisconsin | 74 | 76 | 58 | 30 | 35 | 31 | 31 | 32 | 26 | 4 | 8 | 1 | 9 | 1 | 0 |
| Wyoming | 14 | 11 | 10 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 10 | 7 | 7 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| **United States** | **5,254** | **4,613** | **4,205** | **3,249** | **2,836** | **2,562** | **1,450** | **1,309** | **1,262** | **440** | **376** | **306** | **115** | **92** | **75** |

*Total firearm deaths and homicide firearm deaths exclude firearm deaths by legal (police or corrections) intervention and deaths by air rifles.

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. National Center for Health Statistics, unpublished tabulations. (1999) Table III: Deaths from 282 selected causes. Calculations by Children's Defense Fund.



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## GUNS IN SCHOOLS

Despite recent, highly publicized school shootings, schools are one of the safest places for children. Children are far more likely to be killed after school, in their own homes, or in their friends' homes than in school. According to the Departments of Education and Justice, 10 percent of all public schools reported any incidents of serious violent crime to the police, and students 12 to18 years were 20 percent less likely to be victims of crime at school in 1997. Despite the decline in the victimization rate in schools over the past several years, students report *feeling* less safe at school today than they did just a few years ago.

The reports of children as young as five years old bringing loaded guns to school are particularly disturbing. Most of these incidents do not result in injury or fatality, but put children at an unnecessarily high risk of harm.

**March 1999.** In Detroit, a 9-year-old boy brought a loaded 9mm handgun to school, reportedly showing it to some students and pretending to fire it at other students as they exited the school building. It was the second time in a week that a child under age 10 was found carrying a gun to school in the greater Detroit area. A few days earlier a 7-year-old boy brought a .22 caliber pistol to his second grade class. (Detroit Free Press, March 10, 1999).

## WHAT IS YOUR STATE AND COMMUNITY DOING TO PROTECT CHILDREN FROM GUNS?

To stop our children from dying and being injured from guns – whether in a homicide, suicide, or accidental shooting – children should not have access to guns, and should be protected from gun violence. Law enforcement officers should crack down on illegal gun dealers and middlemen. Legislators should ban guns with no sporting purpose, like assault weapons and junk handguns, and continue to require all gun purchasers to undergo a background check to ensure their record is free of prior felonies or domestic abuse which would prohibit them from buying a gun. And parents should stop storing guns where children can gain access to them.

The recent tragedies in our schools and communities finally have raised this issue to the forefront of national debate. Although Congress has been slow to respond, some states and communities are taking steps to keep guns out of the hands of children and protect children from gunfire by enacting common-sense gun safety laws.

**June 21, 1999.** In Washington, DC, a grandmother was shot and killed while trying to protect her 4-year-old granddaughter from gunfire. According to police, several men in their twenties were arguing, possibly about an automobile, when they opened fire on one another. The 55-year-old woman was frantically ushering the young child into the house, using her body as a shield between the gunman and the young girl, when she was hit twice in the back. She died less than thirty minutes later. (*The Washington Post*, June 22 and 23, 1999).

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## GUN SAFETY LAWS

### TRIGGER LOCKS

Guns kept in homes with children should be stored locked and unloaded. One study found that 14 percent of parents with guns in their homes reported they did not keep their firearms safely secured.[22] Studies have shown that adults trained in gun safety are not more likely to store their gun safely.[23] Sixteen states have passed laws to protect children from bicycle accidents by requiring helmets, yet only four states, California, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Connecticut, have passed legislation requiring trigger locks be sold with all new gun purchases.

In the absence of state leadership, some communities have initiated safety measures needed to protect children. In Norristown, Pennsylvania, the county commissioner and local sheriff responded to reports that an overwhelming number of households with children had unlocked guns – almost half of which were kept loaded – by making trigger and gun locks available for sale at the sheriff's department. County officials provided funds for the safety devices to resell to gun owners when they apply for concealed weapons permits and hunting licenses. In Maine, Acadia Hospital, with the support of local and state law enforcement, gave away more than 6,000 trigger locks over the past three years through its "Speak Out for Kids" program.

**What the American public wants:**

**63%** favor stricter gun control laws

**90%** would support a law requiring background checks on people buying guns at gun shows

**79%** support requiring trigger locks on all stored guns

**77%** support a nationwide ban on the sale of assault weapons

**75%** support a law requiring all handgun owners to register their firearms with the government

**50%** believe that stricter gun control laws would reduce the amount of violent crime in the country.

From ABC News/Washington Post poll, September 1999.

### CAP LAWS

Child Firearm Access Prevention (CAP) laws permit prosecution of adults if their firearm is left unsecured and a child uses that firearm to harm themselves or others. Under most CAP laws it is a misdemeanor to leave a loaded firearm where the person reasonably should know that a child is likely to gain access. The estimated number of households with guns is as high as 40 percent and more than half of these guns are kept unlocked.[24] **Twelve states that have enacted CAP laws witnessed a 23 percent drop in accidental shootings of children between 1990 and 1994.** Based on this 1997 study, an estimated 216 children killed in unintentional shootings would still be alive today if CAP laws were in effect in every state.[25] Seventeen states have enacted CAP laws since 1989.

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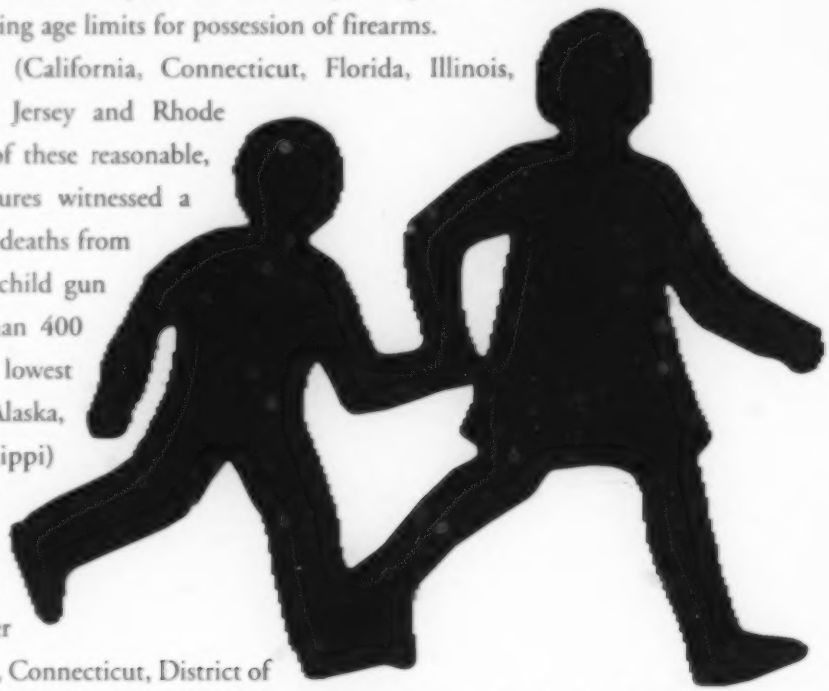
## Transfer/Sale/Possession Restrictions

Under Federal law it is illegal for a federally licensed gun dealer to sell any firearm to anyone under 18. However, there is no age restriction at the federal level for *possession* of long guns and other hunting rifles. **It is legal in many states for a child as young as 12 to possess any number of semi-automatic weapons, including firearms used in the Columbine tragedy**. Many of these guns change hands at largely unregulated gun shows and other public markets. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms estimates that nearly one-quarter of the dealers at these open markets are non-licensed sellers who sell to whomever they wish without having to request identification or perform background checks.[26]

While current law prohibits federally licensed dealers from selling handguns to anyone under 21, it fails to prohibit a 19-year-old from buying a handgun from a private individual. Absent tough federal restrictions, some states took action and passed laws making it illegal to transfer any firearms to children and creating age limits for possession of firearms.



Eight of the ten states (California, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Rhode Island) that enacted a majority of these reasonable, common-sense gun safety measures witnessed a drop in the number of child gun deaths from 1996. Despite the fact that the child gun death total dropped by more than 400 from 1996 to 1997 and is the lowest since 1989, several of the states (Alaska, Kentucky, Maine, and Mississippi) with only one or no gun safety protections experienced an increase in child gun deaths. The 10 states with the greatest number of gun safety measures (California, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Rhode Island) together account for nearly half of the total decline in child gun deaths from 1996 to 1997. The total decrease in child gun deaths among these top states is two times greater than the states with the fewest protections.

THE TOTAL DECREASE IN CHILD GUN DEATHS AMONG THE 10 STATES WITH THE GREATEST NUMBER OF CHILD GUN SAFETY MEASURES IS TWO TIMES GREATER THAN THE STATES WITH THE FEWEST.

## 10 BEST STATES IN CHILD GUN SAFETY LAWS

### *Protecting children,* instead of guns

These states enacted a majority of protections to help keep guns out of the hands of children.

**California, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Rhode Island**

## WORST STATES IN CHILD GUN SAFETY LAWS

### *Protecting guns,* instead of children

These states failed to enact a majority of basic protections to keep guns out of the reach of children.

**Alabama, Alaska, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Mississippi, Montana, New York, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Wyoming**

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### *Providing some child gun safety laws,* but not enough

These states passed some safety measures, but could do much more to make children's safety the highest priority.

**Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin**

## GUN CONTROL LAWS BY STATE

| STATE | Juvenile Handgun Purchase Age Limit (21yrs) 1 | Prohibition on Transfer to a Juvenile 2 | Juvenile Handgun Possession Age Limit (18 yrs) 3 | Juvenile Long Gun Possession Age Limit (18 yrs) 4 | CAP Laws 5 | Trigger Lock Laws 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Alabama | | ✓ | | | | |
| Alaska | | | | | | |
| Arizona | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Arkansas | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| California | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Colorado | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Connecticut | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Delaware | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| District of Columbia | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Florida | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Georgia | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Hawaii | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Idaho | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Illinois | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Indiana | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Iowa | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Kansas | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Kentucky | | | ✓ | | | |
| Louisiana | | ✓ | | | | |
| Maine | | ✓ | | | | |
| Maryland | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Massachusetts | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Michigan | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Minnesota | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Mississippi | | ✓ | | | | |
| Missouri | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Montana | | | | | | |
| Nebraska | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Nevada | | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| New Hampshire | | ✓ | | | | |
| New Jersey | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| New Mexico | | | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| New York | | ✓ | | | | |
| North Carolina | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| North Dakota | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Ohio | ✓ | ✓ | | | | |
| Oklahoma | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Oregon | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Pennsylvania | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Rhode Island | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| South Carolina | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| South Dakota | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Tennessee | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Texas | | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| Utah | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Vermont | | ✓ | | | | |
| Virginia | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Washington | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| West Virginia | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Wisconsin | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Wyoming | | | | | | |

Source: Handgun Control, Inc., 1999. Updated by Children's Defense Fund.

- Column one indicates that the minimum age required to purchase a handgun is 21 years.
- Column two indicates that the state has made it illegal to transfer a handgun to a juvenile.
- Column three indicates that the minimum age required to possess a handgun is 18 years.
- Column four indicates that the minimum age to possess a long gun is 18 years.
- Column five indicates whether the state has enacted a "CAP" or Child Access Prevention Law that requires adults to store their firearms responsibly and out of the reach of children.
- Column six indicates whether the state has enacted a trigger lock law, which requires that firearms be sold with safety locks.



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## Action Steps to Protect Children

Everyone must get serious about protecting children and communities from gun violence. We must continue to press our local, state, and federal officials to propose and support common-sense gun safety measures that will keep firearms out of the hands of children and those who would harm them. We need legislation requiring the licensing and regulation of all guns and ammunition. All firearms should be treated as the dangerous products that they are. No matter where you live or what laws your state legislature has passed, there are steps that parents, educators, religious and community leaders can take to protect children instead of guns.

**If you are a parent or grandparent, you can:**

- Remove all guns from your home especially if children live there or visit.
- If you believe you must have firearms in your home, store them unloaded and locked where children can't reach them.
- Check out the homes where your children visit or play to find out whether there are guns and whether they are properly stored.
- Stay connected with your children. Look for changes in behavior. Talk to your children. Listen to what they have to say. Be a good role model. Don't bring violence into your home.
- Monitor what your children watch. Limit their access to video games, television, movies, and Internet surfing that feature violent images and behavior.

**If you are an educator, you can:**

- Provide children positive adult supervision after school, on weekends, and during summer months.
- Be watchful for early warning signs. Take a child's depression or erratic behavior seriously.
- Sponsor a conflict resolution or peer mediation program for students.
- Work with parents and administrators to develop effective school violence prevention plans.
- Incorporate non-violence in your school curricula.

**If you are a religious leader, you can:**

- Provide children with a safe haven for constructive after-school, summer, and weekend activities.
- Continue to raise awareness abouth youth violence through your ministry and engage children and families in discussing and seeking solutions to community violence.
- Draw attention to successful models, strategies, and ideas for youth prevention through sermons, teachings, and moral examples.
- Include violence prevention resource information in your bulletins and newsletters.
- Support professional training for clergy and lay leaders so that they are better able to identify and reach out to a troubled child.

**If you are a community leader, you can:**

- Convene a community roundtable bringing together law enforcement, religious leaders, educators, parents, and students to discuss and promote awareness about gun violence and other forms of violence.
- Make your voice heard – let your elected officials know you support common-sense gun safety laws that keep guns out of the hands of children and those who harm children.
- Organize a broad-based coalition to encourage elected officials to propose and support gun safety measures.
- Engage local businesses in efforts to support and promote programs that provide children with safe, constructive out-of-school activities and ask them to stop selling or advertising violent toys, products, or programs.
- Lead by example. Volunteer for after-school, summer, and weekend activities for children and be a mentor for children by exemplifying non-violent behavior.

To learn more about activities and resources to help protect children from gun violence, visit our Website at http://www. childrensdefense.org, e-mail us at genprog@childrensdefense.org, or call our violence prevention project at 1-800-CDF-1200.

# Endnotes


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